Two Steps Forward by botanicapoetica

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Summary:

As the car slowed to a stop in front of the movie theater, Steve watched Billy’s smile grow a little bigger. He’d planned a full, elaborate day, but it was Nancy who had talked him down from it. “If I were him, I think I’d still want peace and quiet. Just...a little different, maybe.” She’d said once Steve had gushed about road trips and the state fair. He’d felt dejected at first, until she’d followed up with, “Steve, I think he’d just like to do anything at all with you. Even something small.”

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Author's Note:

- For inkyreveries.

  For sweet inky, who got me to pull this series out of its sabbatical.

Steve had planned everything fucking meticulously. Getting Billy out of the house other than for school was like pulling teeth, and getting Hopper to let him do this was even harder. A week of hushed arguments in the kitchen and on the porch had led to Steve finally taking Billy out. They weren't overt about it, couldn't afford to be, but having Billy out in the world and trying to push some normalcy on to him little by little would be good for both of them.

The day had started with amicable breakfast at the cabin, though Steve could feel Hopper's barely contained protests practically laying on top of him. El and Billy didn't seem to notice, both of them too caught up talking about the newest old as shit movie that played during the week. All Steve could recall of it was El and Billy blinking owlishly at a grease-covered Marlon Brando and his own very childish jealousy at the sight.

When Steve was done getting them to the door and helping Billy into his coat, Hopper had told them to have fun, setting his hand on Steve's shoulder heavily with implication. He knew Hopper was just worried, that there were things that had happened that Steve would never know, so he tried to meet the man's eyes long enough to put him at ease. That seemed to do it, and Billy was pulling them impatiently to Steve's car, eager to get out.

"Where are we going?" Billy asked once he'd buckled up, a small upturn on his lips. Everything Billy did was small now, diminished from the boisterous person he'd once been, but Steve took it as a win. Each small smile, each quiet laugh was pulling Billy back out, back toward Steve again. Steve mimed zipping his lips shut and started driving.

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He let Billy out of his side of the car, having to jam his hands inside his pockets to keep them from reaching for the other boy's. Ferris Bueller's Day Off flashed across the screen, but Steve was watching Billy the entire time. His curls were soft and wild, going whichever way they pleased, his long eyelashes brushing his cheeks with each hard laugh. Walking out of the theater felt like relief, keeping himself as close to Billy as he could, daring to put his hand against the small of his back.

Steve's hand fell away from Billy as a body collided with the other boy's shoulder, whipping him to the side. He watched Billy reach down to pick up the man's grocery bag for him and took in the closely cut hair and straightened shoulders before reaching out with a death grip around Billy's arm. Neil Hargrove straightened up at the same time as Billy, and Steve felt the other boy freeze at his side. The man regarded them painfully slowly, his lips curling into a nasty sneer. Steve watched him run his tongue over his teeth, his eyes boring into Billy's, before he was walking away from them like nothing happened.

"H-home." Billy said through tightly shut teeth, his eyes following Neil's trajectory even after he'd walked out of sight. He showed no signs of moving though, so Steve helped him move stiffly to the passenger's seat of the car, not giving a shit who saw. Steve started driving as quickly as he could, hearing nothing but Billy's progressively desperate breathing and seeing his body start to shudder out of the corner of his eye. When the breathing turned into wheezing Steve yanked the steering wheel, parking in a turnaround and facing Billy.

Billy's pupils were blown wide, every muscle in his body tensed like it was fighting something off. Steve reached forward to unbuckle the

other boy and felt his guts twist at the blanked out expression that was fighting for dominance on his face. He reached a hand to touch Billy's cheek and it was like a dam broke open; a sharp shout of a gasp left him and suddenly he was doubled over. Steve's ears rang at the sounds, closer to screaming than crying, the hair on the back of his neck standing up.

He made his way around the car, yanking the passenger side door open and reaching for Billy again, trying to pry him out of the ball he'd curled into. Billy wouldn't stop screaming, his hands clenched tightly around his ears and his shoulders shaking.

"Billy, Billy! Hey! Come on, Billy." Steve said frantically, trying to get his arms in between the other boy's. Billy's head whipped up finally, his eyes bloodshot and his cheeks soaked already. The other boy's hands shot out to grip Steve's shirt, his head falling into the crook of his neck heavily. He was crying hoarsely, big gulping sobs that sounded painful. Long minutes passed with Billy's weight pressed fully against him until he realized it wasn't abating any time soon.

"We're going home, it's okay. We're gonna go home." Steve said, to himself as much as Billy in that moment. He tugged Billy off of him, guilt settling over him as Billy had no choice but to curl into himself again while Steve got in to drive. It felt like it took hours to get back to the cabin, and Steve parked as close as he could, leaning out of the door to scream Hopper's name. Hoping the man heard him, he tried uncurling Billy's body again but was met with more panicked screaming, the force of it making Billy's nose bleed down his chin.

Steve heard the door slam open, relieved when Hopper pulled the passenger side door open. "We saw him. He...we saw him. While we were out." was all Steve could think to say, not sure if even something as small as using the motherfucker's name might make things worse. He had a hard time imagining what 'worse' looked like. He watched Hopper swallow heavily and set his eyes on Steve, some kind of righteous anger filling the space of the car, but it didn't last long. There wasn't time.

"Hey kid, you're home. You're home Billy, don't worry. He can't come here, he won't come here." Hopper said, his voice and face soft but his words serious. Steve watched him pull Billy out of the car,

watched Billy tumble out boneless, watched Hopper cradle him and followed behind silently. It couldn't have been easy, Billy had lost some weight but not enough for that to be comfortable, but Hopper kept his face carefully neutral.

El stood at the open door, her eyes passing over each of them and zeroing in on Billy, her brows furrowing. Steve helped Hopper lay Billy down on the couch but the blonde's hands had Hopper's shirt in a vice grip. His eyes were shut tight, his hands shaking against Hopper's chest until it looked like someone had unplugged him. Steve looked up to see El resting her little hand on Billy's forehead, her thumb sweeping across his brow bone with deep focus. He watched Billy's hands unclench and rest on his stomach, his eyes fluttering closed; he was still shaking, making smaller noises now, but Steve knew it was the best they were going to get. He was up in a second when Hopper walked to the kitchen, knowing he was expected to follow.

The second they reached the tile Steve couldn't stop the words coming out of his mouth. "I'm so fucking sorry, Hop. I should've listened to you, I shouldn't have pushed. Everything's fucked up now, he's gone again, I didn't-" he said, fully aware of the hysteria creeping into his voice, until Hopper's arms stopped him, pulling him roughly into a strong hug. He wanted to pull away, tell Hopper he didn't deserve this comfort, but the man's words gave him pause.

"He's not gone, Steve. He's right there. I'd kill his fucking father for him if I could, but he's not gone. He's not." Hopper said into his ear, holding him tight until he gave in, all the adrenaline that had built up leaving him in a wave. They stood there until Steve felt sleep reaching for him, and sat himself in front of the couch, resting his head on it just inches from Billy's face. His eyes were drifting closed when he felt a hand reach through his hair, resting behind his ear. He was right there.